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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 112 DECEMBER 17TH, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

Since the last News-Letter went to press the flames of war have burst into a conflagration which engulfs the globe. Nine-tenths of the population of the world are already involved. The sum of human suffering swells to inconceivable proportions; for hundreds of millions hunger and want will be intensified and prolonged. These are the stark realities of our present existence. There is only one answer to the gathering strength and momentum of the forces of death. It is the complete surrender of ourselves to the power of the creative, life-giving activity of the Spirit, in the unswerving faith that the ultimate reality of the universe is Spirit and all that that implies. The response has to be made at two levels.

The speeches in Parliament last week gave expression to the unshakeable resolve of the nation to redouble its efforts to overcome the new danger. The treacherous assault prior to a declaration of war, which as the President of the United States pointed out is the culmination of a whole series of attacks without warning, leaves no doubt about the direction in which mankind is moving. We are back at the law of the jungle. The doctrine to which the Axis Powers have unashamedly committed themselves, that naked and untempered force is the sole arbiter in human affairs, is one on which no society, national or international, can be founded. For the preservation of the slow, uphill gains of mankind in bringing public life under the rule of law and subjecting the use of force to moral restraints no price is too high. Four-fifths of the people of the world are associated in a common resistance to the brutal assault on the elementary decencies of life. We must hope that through this association the slumbering torch of faith in these values may, in the words of the Prime Minister, grow into " a light which shines on land and sea," and that the force which it is necessary to employ to defend them may be resolutely directed, as the President said, " towards the ultimate good as well as the immediate evil."

But response at this level is not enough. It can achieve its purpose, and be saved from frustration and disappointment, only if it is fed from deeper sources. It would be a fatal mistake, which would defeat our hopes, to equate the spiritual struggle between the forces of death and of life with the armed conflict between the two groups of powers. The mistake would be fatal, because it would be completely unrealistic. Good and evil in life are inextricably mixed; they never separate themselves out into two sharply opposed camps. The forces of life are not extinct among those with whom we are at war. We have had recent evidence of moral forces in Germany courageously resisting and denouncing the evils of the Nazi regime. We recorded last week the union of Christian Churches in Japan on the basis of belief in God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—that same belief which is the foundation of our own hope of triumph over the powers of darkness. It would be no less unreal to refuse to recognize that the forces of spiritual decay and death are at work among ourselves. The evils that have found concentrated expression in the policy of the Axis Powers have struck root everywhere. They have to be fought within as well as without. Unless we see that, and act on it, we shall be the victims of our own gross self-deception. Germany and Japan may be defeated, but the doctrine and spirit which have in their soil attained such noxious growth may remain to infect and corrupt the whole life of mankind.

Those who fight in a righteous cause are exposed to dangerous temptation. The danger is that they should come to trust in their own righteousness which, since it is tainted with human frailty and sin, is far less whole-hearted, deep-rooted and stable than they suppose, and may at any moment reveal its utter inadequacy. It is one of the profoundest insights into the realities of human life that sinners may be nearer to salvation than the righteous.

Our response therefore at the level that really matters must be a trust in God's righteousness, which is unchanging and without respect of persons, and not in its imperfect and broken embodiment in our national cause; and in His grace, in which, and not in any deserts or virtues of our own, is our only hope. The fundamental choice which confronts us is the subject of this week's Supplement. This was written before the sudden extension of the war, but the issues it raises gain a deepened significance from that event.

TENDENCIES OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT ON THE CONTINENT

The information given in the last issue about the Churches in Europe may be supplemented by a more general description from a well-informed observer on the continent. He says that the tremendous upheavals and the insecurity of life have deeply affected the outlook of Protestant Christians. Some are inclined to take refuge in pure otherworldliness. But others are coming to see both that the life of the Church has its own history and laws, which are not dependent on political events, and that Christians cannot be indifferent to the problems of the post-war order. Many who previously thought that the Church has nothing to do with secular questions now recognise that the Church has a positive witness to bear to the truth that neither individuals nor nations can transgress God's laws without suffering for it. While the Churches have for long neglected this prophetic ministry, they are beginning again to remind men that there are divine commandments which cannot be ignored, and to take a stand against their violation in political life. If this movement grows in strength and range it may have great importance for the future.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, 21 NORTHMOOR ROAD, OXFORD.

Published by Dr. J. H. Oldham for the Council on the Christian Faith and the Common Life and printed by the Kemp Hall Press, Ltd., in the City of Oxford.

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Supplement to C.N-L. No. 112

ALL REAL LIFE IS MEETING

Among the thousand questions which perplex and baffle us is there some crucial issue which, if it were rightly understood and rightly dealt with, would mark the turning-point in our society from sickness to health? In the confusing complexity of life to-day is there one decisive point at which a change, if it were to come about, would be so fundamental as to mark off one period of history from another? That seems to me to be the question which Professor John Macmurray was asking in his recent broadcast talks on " Persons and Functions."

PERSONS AND FUNCTIONS

It would be difficult to formulate the issue more succinctly than in the illustration with which he began his talks. G. K. Chesterton was once moved to anger on seeing on a poster the advertisement of an article entitled " Should Shop-assistants Marry? " The proper question, he thought, should have been : " Should human beings capable of love and marriage consent to be shop-assistants? " It shows the extent to which our values have become distorted that, instead of the statement appearing obvious, the first reaction of most of us probably is to think of it as one of Chesterton's clever epigrams and to wonder whether there is not a catch somewhere.

What Professor Macmurray believes to be fundamentally wrong with our present society is that its underlying assumption is that people are less important than the jobs they do, whereas the true (and Christian) view is that men and women are essentially persons, meant to live in personal fellowship with one another and that the services which they have to perform in society are incidental and subordinate to this personal life.

When we distinguish the personal and the functional, we do not mean that one part of our time is given to personal relations and another part spent in performing functions, nor that the life of some people is predominantly personal and that of others predominantly functional, though these statements are often to a large extent true in fact. In all human life the personal and the functional are inseparably interwoven. Nowhere does the personal find more complete expression than in the love of a wife and mother, while the care and management of a home is at the same time the most necessary of social functions. The *whole* of life is functional; everything that the individual does contributes in some way to the life of society. But it is possible for this functional life to be transfigured by becoming the vehicle of intercourse between persons. The function of eating, for example, may be lifted to a high spiritual level in the intercourse of the common family meal. The doing of jobs may become a means to the mutual enrichment of human beings through intelligence and love.

Everything hinges in Professor Macmurray's view on whether in our hearts, and consequently in our practice, we regard human beings as existing primarily for the building up of an efficient society and state, or whether we find the real significance of life in the mutual relations of persons, which all human activities are meant to further and enrich. For the sake of the fulness of personal life functions must be efficiently performed, and it is in the common performance of functions that persons find opportunities of fellowship and mutual service. But the whole future of mankind turns on whether human beings are regarded as means or end.

MARTIN BUBER'S " I AND THOU "

The same demand for a fundamental change in our way of looking at things—a challenge more truly revolutionary than either Nazism or Communism—is made in a little book by a German writer, now an exile from the country of his birth. The book was begun during the last war. A preliminary sketch was made in 1916, a first draft completed three years later, the work put into final shape in 1922 and published in the following year—six years for the writing of a small volume of little more than a hundred pages. An English translation appeared

in 1937[1] and has attracted far less attention than its importance deserves. I question whether any book has been published in the present century, the message of which, if it were understood and heeded, would have such far-reaching consequences for the life of our time. That the importance of this small volume has been as yet so little perceived shows with what difficulty truth that might save us is able to penetrate the crust of our inveterate habits of thought.

The book is at once a poem and the profoundest philosophy, compressed into a hundred pages. It does not disclose its meaning on a first reading. We have to go back to it again and again, allowing it slowly to remould our thought. As this takes place, sentences which at first seemed difficult and obscure will be found to be full of profound meaning.

THE TWOFOLD NATURE OF EXISTENCE

The world, Buber tells us, has a twofold meaning. Man's attitude to it is dual. The two attitudes are different and uninterchangeable. To understand this twofold nature of human existence is the beginning of wisdom.

This twofold attitude is expressed in the fundamental difference between our relation to persons and our relation to things or objects. That is not precisely Buber's language. He speaks of the difference between our relation to the world of " Thou " and our relation to the world of " It." But the term " Thou " has disappeared in English as a form of address to a human person, though it survives in the language of the most personal of all relations–the language of prayer. For our present purpose Buber's meaning can sufficiently be expressed by the contrast between persons and things, provided we understand clearly that, in the sense in which the words are here used, persons are not always persons nor things always things. Persons may be, and for certain purposes must be, treated as things, as when we organise them or discipline them or care for their health of body or of mind; and even in the most personal meeting the " Thou " who addresses us and to whom we respond is continually passing over into a " He " or " She " (which in respect of the twofold attitude is the same as an " It"). We become aware for example, of the tone of our friend's voice or of the colour of his hair or of his individual characteristics, and he no longer confronts us as a person but has become an object among other objects. Every human person is at the same time an " It." On the other hand, both animate and inanimate nature can meet us in a personal approach—confront us, that is to say, not as something to be experienced and used, but as entering into relation with us, making demands on us and evoking from us a full personal response of our whole being.

This distinction between two fundamental attitudes may appear at first sight difficult and abstruse. But in reality what Buber is talking about is the common stuff of our ordinary experience. If it seems difficult, it can only be because we have not been in the habit of reflecting on our experience; and partly also because, as we shall see, our experience has become distorted. Things have gained so strong a hold over us as to blunt our sensitiveness to the personal.

THE WORLD OF THINGS

Let us look first at the world of things. I observe something, I imagine something, I feel something, I think something, I will something. These activities have all to do with " It," and taken together they seem to include the whole range of our experience. To the world of objects belongs the whole of the vast domain over which science reigns. To it belong also the spheres of industry and commerce, the tasks of the economist and statesman. All organisation, all arranging and ordering have to do with things. From the mechanisation of life, from the pressure of institutions, men seek an escape into the region of feeling, hoping there to find the meaning of personal life. But feelings, as the feelings of an individual, belong also to the world of " It." It might seem as though we had included the whole of life in the world of things. It is true that everything that we *experience* and everything that we *use* belongs to that world. Just as the whole of life is functional, so it is embedded inextricably in a world of " It " and lived in an unbroken relation to things.

THE WORLD OF PERSONS

Yet nothing could be further from the truth than that man's life consists only in activities which have some *thing* for an object. From out of this infinite, inexhaustible world of things which he is so eager to explore, to taste, to appropriate and to bend

[1] *I and Thou.* Martin Buber. (T. & T. Clarke, Edinburgh, 2s. 6d.)

to his purposes there may come to him unexpectedly a voice. What that voice may say to him he cannot himself control; he can only listen and respond. In relation to the world of things man is master; he observes, measures, weighs, judges, arranges, and orders. But in the encounter with another person he is no longer the sole arbiter; he does not alone control the situation. He is addressed and has to respond. The situation to which he has to respond is not created by him but created for him. He *meets* the other. He has passed from his solitariness into community, where there is not one point of view but two or more.

Things exist, events take place, in the context of space and time. Each is bounded by something else. But a person is not a thing among other things. We do not *experience* a person—so far as we experience another person it is as a " He " or " She "—but enter into relation with him. He gives himself to us; we give ourselves to him. Meeting takes place not in a fixed and stable world of unalterable law, but in the free and living present in which the world is continually born anew.

The meeting is unforeseeable. It comes unexpectedly. It is not found by seeking. We can, of course, make a date, and keep it, but that does not in itself ensure the personal meeting. The other meets us by grace; our response to the meeting is our destiny. We cannot "order" the world of personal meeting; only things can be ordered and planned.

It is through our responses to other persons that we become persons. It is others who challenge, enlighten and enrich us. There is no such thing as the isolated individual. We are persons only in our relation with other persons. How greatly this has been forgotten is evident when one picks up almost any modern work or statement on education. So strong is the humanist, individualistic tradition that the starting-point is almost always the individual child, and the question is discussed how he may rightly relate himself to other persons—how he may become social. But in reality the relation comes first; only out of it is personality born.

Reality is the lived relation. Through sharing in the giving and receiving of mutual being the " I " becomes real. " Reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate it for myself. Where there is no sharing there is no reality. Where there is appropriation by the self there is no reality." *All real life is meeting.*

Every day the meeting awaits us. But whether it takes place depends on our choice. Our egoism continually tempts us to evade it. We prefer to wrap ourselves in our solitariness and pursue our solitary purposes. As a protection against the meeting we build round us a wall of ideas—a philosophy, a theology, a tradition, a point of view. Nothing can reach us that does not get through its meshes. We take refuge in an imagined world where we are safe from the disturbing challenge of the " Thou." Not only those about us but the great ones of the past are ready to meet us. They are willing to become alive again and enter into contemporary life. But we are content too often to pile up information about them rather than allow them really to speak to us. Day by day opportunities of meeting touch us with their wings and finding no eagerness of response pass us by. The windows through which we might have caught glimpses of eternity remain closed, and our life narrows and hardens into death.

The difference between the lonely world in which the individual in his isolation experiences and uses and the living world of relation is no new discovery. Raymond Lull understood it, when he wrote in the thirteenth century " He who loves not lives not "; the writer of the First Epistle of St. John knew it, when he wrote, " He that loveth not, abideth in *death.*"

THE PETRIFACTION OF OUR WORLD

In both the life of the individual and the history of the race there is a progressive increase in the extent and domination of the world of things. The ability to experience the world and to use what it contains steadily grows. With this growing capacity in the one direction there is apt to go a decrease in man's power to enter into relation.

This is the same thing as to say that there is a diminution in the life of the spirit. For spirit lives in relation. It is not in the " I," but *between* the " I " and the " Thou." Spirit is the *word*; the act of communication. Only through entering into relation can man live in the spirit.

But is it possible, we may well ask, that our world should be freed from domination by the " It "? Is a reversal of the balance even conceivable? Is not man a hopeless captive in the prison-house of his organisation? Does not the vastness and complexity of the structure of the modern state and

economic activity rule out all directness and all forms of action which are alien to their own nature and laws? Is not the statesman and economist bound to deal with men, not as persons, but as functionaries?

The answer is that these structures, which have to do with the world of things, may yet, without neglect or violation of any of their proper laws, be permeated with the animating breath of spirit. The world of things is not evil, but good. It becomes evil only when the spirit has departed from it—when it is no longer servant but master. In a society in which men retain the power to enter into relations, the working of institutions undergoes a subtle change, because the people who work them know something of the life of the spirit. New possibilities of action present themselves to the statesman, and the risk that would have shattered a lifeless and mechanical structure may be wholly justified in a structure "over which the presence of the 'Thou' broods."

HOW MAY WE BE SAVED?

And so we come at the end to the crucial question. If Macmurray and Buber—two prophetic voices, each declaring independently a similar message—are right, how may the fundamental change come about, which will free society from the baleful incubus of "It" and restore the healthy and life-giving intercourse of persons living in community? Buber's answer is an arresting one. It was once believed that power could be obtained over an evil spirit by addressing it by its real name. In the same way the seemingly all-powerful world of "It" which threatens to crush the spirit of man will fade into nothingness before those who know it for what it really is—something which is separated and alienated from true life. The word "It" is a word of separation. The thing stands over against you in its separateness; you may take it, and use it but it does not give itself to you. The word "Thou" is a word of union. When you utter it—when you are addressed and you respond—you are re-united with the pulsating life of the universe. For in every "Thou" that addresses us and calls us to a responsible decision, there speaks the voice of the eternal "Thou," the source of all life, the creative, living Spirit of God.

The answer to our question is then the answer of religion. There is that in the universe which is waiting to meet us. Let us go forth to meet it. What will come from the meeting is not in our hands. If it were, there would be no meeting: we should be still in the prison-house of our own self-chosen purposes in which we control and order things.

What comes out of the meeting is God's affair. In every real encounter with life and with our fellow-men we meet the living Spirit, the Creator of life. God is not to be found by leaving the world. He is not found by staying in the world. But those who in their daily living respond with their whole being to the "Thou" by whom they find themselves addressed are caught up into union with the true life of the world. "Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of these My brethren, even these least, ye did it unto *Me*."

Those who meet—who answer in responsible decision to the word addressed to them by another—are already sharers in eternal life. They are already bound together in community. They are allied with the power of the eternal Spirit—a power that can destroy the domination of things, overturn the proudest monuments of ambition and acquisitiveness and restore man to his true life which is realised only in community.

J.H.O.

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